

The University of Chicago

THE RADICAL SCHOOL OF DUTCH
NEW TESTAMENT CRITICISM

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR
OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF NEW TESTAMENT AND
EARLY CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

1933

By
HARRY JAMES HAGER

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There is in the Netherlands a school of New Testament criticism which will always interest the student of history. This school may be considered the left branch of a stream which divided almost at its source, which is the Tubingen School of Criticism.¹ The right wing has traced its effluence chiefly in Germany in the fertile schools of the religious-historical- literary-critical, social-historical, and form-historical methods. These two tendencies, though common in origin, stand at a great distance from each other today.

The left wing, the Dutch radical school, poured forth its literary efforts in artesian abundance in the last decade before the close of the last century, but seems at present, to the superficial observer at least, to have lost itself in the Dead Sea of almost universal disparagement and disregard.²

The labors of the Dutch radicals deserve our studious interest, however, be it only as New Testament palaeontologists examining the fossils of forgotten critical vagaries. Their position is worthy of our study also because of the persistence and consistency with which it has been maintained for more than half a century even till the present time. Some radical exponents have quietly died of innocuous desuetude, but the Dutch defense is as tenacious and determined as were the sea-beggars whose courage laid the foundations of the very University (Leyden) where the radical views have been most persistently championed. The positions of the Dutch school also merit respectful review because of the thoroughness with which their theories have been systematized and re-enforced. While their efforts may seem to some to have been misguided, the scientific temper of their approach is not questioned even by their opponents. One may differ radically from

¹ K. H. Roessingh, Het Modernisme in Nederland (Haarlem, 1922), pp. 113, 119, 189-193.

² G. A. Van Eysinga, "De Verdachtmaking der Radikale Kritiek," Nieuwe Theologische Tydschrift (1926), p. 113.

their conclusions, he is all the while conscious, however, of their thorough scholarship, intellectual candor, and calm reserve - so different from the labors of many radical exponents of other countries.¹ One is impressed also by the fact that the Dutch radicals differ from other representatives in this respect, that they have maintained a distinct school with a consistent tradition and a recognized scholarship over a period of many decades. Her representatives are not dark horses who have entered the lists merely to be hailed as the champions of some new theory of the origin of Christianity.

The chief characteristic positions of the Dutch radical school are as follows:

1. The whole corpus of Pauline literature is placed in the second century usually beginning with Marcion. It is the product of a movement which sought to universalize Christendom under the stimulus of a Greek-Alexandrian philosophy. There is consequently no Pauline testimony to the existence of Jesus.
2. All other New Testament books are dated late so as to make the Christianity described in the New Testament a phenomenon first appearing after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A. D.
3. The contents of all New Testament books without qualification are treated as tendency writings.
4. The priority of Mark is denied and skepticism regarding his testimony to Jesus is maintained. A corollary to this is their theory of the priority of Matthew.
5. As to the historicity of Jesus the Dutch radicals agree with the orthodox traditional view that the dogmatic Christ tradition is the essence of the Gospel, but maintain that both the Christ and the Jesus of the Gospels essentially related to him are purely mythical figures.
6. Regarding the origin of Christianity the Dutch radicals maintain that the Christian religion began with the Christ myth created by the Christian's need of a Saviour-God, which myth is

¹ E. C. VanderLaan, Protestant Modernism in Holland (Oxford Press, 1924), pp.12, 103; H. Windisch, "Ter Beoordeeling van de Radikale Kritiek," Nieuwe Theologische Tydschrift (1926), p.203.

the product of such factors as Hellenistic philosophy, popular occultism, and Jewish gnosticism.

7. Regarding the origin of the Jesus story of the Gospels they hold that subsequent institutional needs and community problems of the later Christian groups led to the creation of the figure of the historical Jesus, who probably never had any actual existence. He is the product of religious speculation and pious legend. The divine cult hero is humanized and historified for cult purposes.

8. Its theory of religion regards the whole process of the humanization of Christ in history as a symbolization of the religious experience of the whole human race. Man first deifies the ideal of his mundane life, then humanizes this ideal in actual experience.

9. Its philosophical background is Hegelian idealism, which regards the Christian system as the limited mundane representation of the eternal religious idea. The eternal Christ is supra-historical, hence there is no such thing as an authentic history of Christianity.

The chief exponent of Dutch radical New Testament criticism today is Professor G. A. Van Eysinga, extraordinary Professor of Theology at the University of Utrecht. Their position, however, has been consistently maintained since the year 1880 by such eminent scholars as Pierson, Loman, Naber, Van Manen, and Bolland.

H. U. Meyboom of Groningen, who has been one of the most consistent and careful of the critics of the radical New Testament movement in Holland, classifies his radical colleagues as representatives of the religious-historical school. If this classification is used, they should be further characterized as religions-geschiedtlichen of the left wing. This label distinguishes them from the religious-historical school of Germany founded by Eichhorn and Bousset, and later represented by Carl Clemen, Rudolf Seydel, and Herman Gunkel,¹ who maintain that the gospel

¹ Carl Clemen, Religionsgeschichtliche Erklärung des Neuen Testaments (Giessen, 1909); Der Geschichtliche Jesus (Giessen, 1911); Rudolf Seydel, Das Evangelium von Jesus in seinen Verhältnissen zu Buddha-saga und Buddha-Lehre (Leipzig, 1882);

records have been colored and affected by the importation of foreign elements but do not discard the historicity of the earliest sources in the gospels.

Their guiding principle has been the interpretation of the New Testament, according to the comparative history of religion. Seydel emphasized Buddhistic influence upon the evangelical story of Jesus. Gunkel traced the Christology of Paul in large part to a Messianic theology in which Paul had been schooled while he was still a Pharisee. The myths of the death and resurrection of the deity were also employed by Gunkel as the basis of the early Christian conceptions about the death and resurrection of Christ. This comparative study has also been followed with great assiduity by the radicals, but has led in their case to entirely different conclusions. The regular representatives of the religious-historical school have not in the least intended to question the historical existence of Jesus, but aimed to support the opinion that the worship of Jesus as the Christ had its roots in the deification of a man.

The Dutch radicals have opposed the older liberal school represented by Harnack, Wernle, and Bousset more firmly than any other tendency. In some respects the radical skepticism has been different from that of the liberals only in degree, yet their hypothesis of symbolism, their emphasis on the supremacy of the idea, their critical view of the New Testament placed them at the antipodes over against Harnack and his confrères. The tendency of the contributions of Harnack was more to establish the historical reliability of the New Testament documents. This could only occasion the strongest opposition of the radicals.

The traditional supernaturalistic school, represented by the strict Calvinists in Holland, was also diametrically opposed to the positions of the radicals, yet we discover very little clash of opinion in the contemporary literature between these two positions. Both schools were united in their conception of what the traditional representation of Jesus was. Both adhered to the Christ of faith as the true picture. The Dutch radicals have al-

ways been respectful of both the scholarship and the defense of such men as Kuyper, Woltjer, and Grosheide. They have shown less patience with men like De Zwaan, who as representatives of the ethical-orthodox tendency aimed to keep abreast of the skeptical criticism and at the same time to retain the traditional concepts of the Christian faith.

The Dutch radicals have stood opposed to the eschatological school of Schweitzer and Wrede, especially since the whole field of Graeco-Roman syncretism was opened. The eschatologists have consistently maintained the Jewish background of the New Testament and have not admitted the correspondences between Paul and the mysteries. It must be remembered, however, that the critical skepticism of Wrede was considerably influenced by the Radicalism of Bauer, Volkmar, Hoekstra, and even Loman.¹

Yet the consistency with which the eschatological school maintained the priority of Mark was a continuous offense to the Dutch radicals, who otherwise rejoiced at Wrede's insight into the tendency-character of the gospels. Whereas Wrede attributed the idea of Jesus' secret Messiahship to the confluence of the Pauline concept of a post-resurrection Messiah and the primitive Christian evaluation of the earthly career of the founder, the Dutch radicals, especially Van Eysinga, ascribed this device of the secret Messiahship to the church's necessity of combining the earlier disciples' convictions of Jesus as the Messiah with the later Paulinist conception of Jesus as the metaphysical Son of God.²

The radical school is most firmly opposed by the modern representatives of the social-historical method, who discover the weakness of the radical position in its failure to evaluate properly the influence of environment upon the growth and expansion of a religious movement. They also ascribe the fallacy of the radicals to their failure to take account of the findings of modern psychology and apply these to the understanding of the early

¹ G. A. Van Eysinga, Die Hollandische Radicale Kritiek des Nieuwen Testaments (Jena, 1912), p.9 footnote.

² G. A. Van Eysinga, Book Review of W. Wrede's Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien, Theologische Tydschrift, 1902, pp. 464-479.

Christian situation. They charge them with a lack of proper historical imagination. Underlying the antagonism of these two schools is the scientific realism of the social-historical method as opposed to the Hegelian idealism of the radicals. Windisch is perhaps the best representative of the modern social-historical school in Holland in recent years.

J. L. Snethlage, who has represented the positions of Weiss and Schweitzer in Holland, has given some attention of late to the skepticism of Bultmann. H. Oort, J. A. Bruins, and A. Bruining, have also evinced some sympathy for the views of Dibelius, Bertram, and Schmidt. Snethlage stands today midway between the eschatological and the form-historical school. Windisch has greeted form-history with a fair measure of approval, but with Bultmann has turned sharply from the radical conclusions which might be drawn from its methods and from its results.

Bultmann's skepticism has led him to surrender completely the hope of recovering the original figure of Jesus. He believes that the first Christians had no biographical interest in Jesus. In this respect he stands close to the Dutch radical school. In his theories of gospel fabrication by the primitive church and his classification of many gospel portions as ideal scenes he approximates some of the positions of the extreme skeptics.¹ The important difference between the two schools is that the representatives of Formgeschichte still believe that the growth of Christianity lay in the mythification of a man who became god, whereas the radicals reverse the process.

The latest school towards which the Dutch radicals have had to formulate their reactions have been the Barthians or neo-Calvinists. The main principles of Barthianism have run directly counter to some of the most important positions of the radical school. Barth, Brunner, and Gogarten have made a sharp distinction between Christianity, on the one hand, and every idealistic religion on the other. Their emphasis upon Christian absolutism plays havoc with Hegelian idealism.

¹ G. A. Van Eysinga, "De Tegenwoordige Stand van de Nieuw Testamentische Wetenschap," Nieuwe Theologische Tydschrift, 1931, p.31.

The one views Christianity as the only true and final religion, the other conceives of it as a temporary phase and incidental expression of the eternal religious idea. Barthianism teaches that divine revelation is specific - that at a definite moment in history some nineteen hundred years ago God was incarnated in Christ, and in Christ alone, and that this was history's grand and awful moment. Radicalism denies this specific character of revelation. To the Hegelian revelation is general, universal, and continuous. To the Barthian revelation is an inrush of divine life into the course of history. To the radical revelation is the expanding pressure of internal religious growth, the new insight of an unfolding religious experience, the new tabernacle in which eternal truth temporarily assumes its latest abode. Barthian revelation is individual, invading human consciousness. Radical revelation is social, manifesting itself in the aspirations of the group and the inspirations of the natural world in which that group lives.¹

The critical methods of the two schools have nothing in common. Barth and his colleagues accept the New Testament figure of Paul as genuine, and explain the paradoxes of his theology in terms of revelation and religious experience. Radicalism loses the figure of Paul in the great movement of Paulinism and explains the paradoxes of Pauline literature on the principle of interpolation, partition, and redaction. Barthianism allows for no syncretism to explain the contents of the New Testament documents. Radicalism explains the documents largely in the light of syncretistic influence.

Perhaps the greatest opposition between the two schools is found in their different conceptions of the idea of myth. According to the radicals, it is the genius of myth to focalize itself in a certain definite historical moment. In its very structure the myth is so constituted that it seeks a special situation in which its universal law is realized and comprehended.

¹ J. L. Snethlage, "Een Nieuwe Pleidooi voor Mythische Religie," Nieuwe Theologische Tydschrift, 1929, pp.33-38; Emil Brunner, "Glaube, Mythos, und Philosophie," Nieuwe Theologische Tydschrift, 1929, pp.139-145.

Though the myth is the vehicle of a universal and eternal principle it tends to individualize its general truth.

The Barthians, on the other hand, maintain that it is the nature of myth to move constantly in a recurring cycle. Though it embody itself in stories and legends which appear to have an historical form, yet the plot and action of a myth are never historical. Their mythical action is a perennial, supra-historical phenomenon, a perpetual and cyclical occurrence. This distinction is significant for any theory of the origin of Christianity. It cuts deep into the fundamental postulates which underlie the radicals' comparative study of contemporary religions, and the conclusions which they draw from analogous phenomena. The Barthians maintain that the myths which seek to objectify the round of nature, the change of seasons, the course of the sun, and the life and death of vegetation, and were expressed in the legends of Attis, Osiris, Demeter, and Mithras, were never focalized in an actual historical occurrence. The nearest approach to this was the annual festivals in which the mythical dramas of life, death, and resurrection were sacramentally re-enacted. The Christian religion, on the other hand, grew out of an actual situation in which the clash of the divinely revealed will of God with the willfulness of man culminated in an inevitable climax in the life, death, and resurrection of the God-man prophet, Jesus Christ.

Viewed from one angle the origin of the Dutch radical school must be traced through Loman and Pierson to Bauer and the Tubingen school. Viewed from another angle, however, Dutch Radicalism is but an eddy in the great streams of skepticism which began with the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Though different in motive and more tempered in spirit the contributions of Dutch Radicalism have flowed into this broad stream and have served to widen the influence of skepticism in the great body of religious thought.

This movement, of which Dutch skepticism was a part, heralded its advent with the publication in 1794 of a startling work of Charles Dupuis which had been preceded by a critical work of Volney. Volney's criticism of the historical character and evidences of Christianity was almost entirely of a negative and

dilettante nature.¹ In the work of Dupuis, Judaism and Christianity were explained as a congeries of oriental religious phenomena which again were traced to a system of astral mythology which arose in upper Egypt. This mythicism did not survive, though it had been bolstered in Germany by the skepticism of Bahrdt and Venturini who had made Jesus a member of the sect of Essenes in possession of an esoteric wisdom which had been drawn from the secret lore of Babylonia, India, Egypt, and Greece.²

This fanciful reconstruction was followed by the mechanical rationalism of Paulus and the mythical theory of Strauss who issued his epochal work, Das Leben-Jesu in 1835. This work was largely based upon the dialectical method of the Hegelian philosophy. Strauss acknowledged the historical existence of Jesus, but maintained that this figure was almost lost beyond recovery under a halo of myth that had been thrown about him from the very beginning. Thirty years later Strauss had arrived at the convictions that the gospel accounts were conscious fabrications rather than hero myths as he had previously held.

The non-historical view of the gospel record and of Jesus was next advocated by Bruno Bauer. He had the misfortune to be the contemporary of Strauss whose earlier work had given him a monopoly in the limelight of critical attention. Whereas Strauss' Life of Jesus had created a great sensation, Bauer languished in comparative oblivion. Bauer was also a Hegelian of the left wing. He differed from Strauss in his emphasis upon the distinctive Christian character of the Messianism of the gospels. His skepticism was even greater than that of his colleague. In him we discover the first suggestions of the system of symbolization by which abstract religious conceptions were supposed to have been

¹ C. Dupuis, L'origine de tous les Cultes, ou la Religion Universelle (Paris, 1794); Abrege de l'origine de tous les Cultes (Paris, 1834); Volney, Les Ruines, ou Meditation sur les Revolutions des Empires (Paris, 1791).

² Bahrdt, Briefe über die Bibel im Volkston; Eine Wochenschrift von einem Prediger auf dem Lande (Halle, 1782); Ausführung des Plans und Zwecks Jesu; Die sämtlichen Reden Jesu aus den Evangelisten Ausgezogen (Berlin, 1786); Venturini, Natürliche Geschichte des grossen Propheten von Nazareth (14 vols., Bethlehem and Copenhagen, 1800-2, 2d Ed., 1806); Case, Historicity of Jesus (Chicago, 1928), pp.32-34.

consciously turned into history. It is this theory and his Pauline skepticism which link Bauer most definitely with the positions of the Dutch radical school. With the death of Bauer the mantle of Radicalism fell upon the Dutch representatives, and the mythical hypothesis entered upon a new phase. Thus the bridge between the latest stage of twentieth century Radicalism and the earliest skepticism of the Aufklärung is Bauer, and the bridge again between modern skepticism and Bauer is the Dutch radical school.

A bird's-eye view of this broad stream of skepticism which has now run its course over a period of almost a century and a half reveals that present-day Radicalism is not a line of thought peculiar to modern times. Its present phase is not an individual fancy of amateur critics and dilettante skeptics but is related to one of the phases and tendencies of modern scientific thought.

As one looks back over the century which is now almost passed since the bomb of Strauss' Leben-Jesu was planted in the bed of New Testament scholarship and the many periodic explosions which have occasioned new excitement from time to time, one wonders in our time of comparative quiescence when the next demonstration of extreme skepticism will appear. Russia's idol, Lenin, despised Christianity largely because its recognized advocates were unwilling to admit that their religion was but a historic manifestation of an idea which needed constantly to assume a new dress in an ever-changing situation, and an idealism which needed to expand constantly to include the growing ideals of an ever-enlarging human experience.

For the present the stream of radical criticism, even in Holland, seems to have lost itself in an estuary of alien importations and a delta of strange tangents. Who knows but that the present situation with forebodings so similar to the pre-Revolutionary days in France might lift the movement above its present impasse and give to the radicals another lease on life.

